98TH CONGRESS
1st Session

COMMITTEE PRINT

S. PRT.
98-115

CENTRAL AMERICA: TREADING DANGEROUS WATERS

A STAFF REPORT

TO THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE

NOVEMBER 1983

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
26-568 O WASHINGTON: 1983

S382-27

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

UNITED STATES SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, D.C., October 14, 1983.

Hon. CHARLES H. PERCY, *Chairman*,
Hon. CLAIBORNE PELL, *Ranking Member*,
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,
U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN AND SENATOR PELL: The increasingly complex and dangerous situation in Central America, with the added component of U.S. troops in Honduras and United States naval forces off the coasts of Nicaragua, has raised more issues for United States policy in the region. These latest developments, together with those in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras, as well as events surrounding the Contadora peace process, provided the setting for a staff trip to assess the situation.

This report is based on a study mission to El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras from August 10–21. During the visit to El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, I accompanied a delegation sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee led by Senator Paul Tsongas (D-Mass.), who joined the delegation in Costa Rica, and Congressman James Shannon (D-Mass.). My visit to Honduras was taken apart from the delegation's Central American visit. The findings of the delegation are being detailed in a separate report by the Service Committee.

Transmitted herewith is the report of my trip.

BARRY SKLAR,
Professional Staff Member.

PREFACE

The announcement in July of joint U.S.-Honduran maneuvers involving 5,000 U.S. troops, along with U.S. naval task forces patrolling both coasts of Nicaragua, added yet another dimension to the increasingly dangerous situation in Central America. In mid-summer, United States-Nicaragua relations continued in a state of decline, tensions between Honduras and Nicaragua were on the rise, and Nicaragua was experiencing the effects of a serious guerrilla movement. Simultaneous to these events, the Contadora peace process was offering a glimmer of hope that an enlarged Central American conflict could be avoided and that peace could be achieved. The situation in El Salvador remained fluid as political and military developments presented a mixed picture of improvement in some areas and no positive change in others. This trip was undertaken to explore these latest developments in relation to U.S. policy and to assess their impact on the individual nations as well as the region as a whole.

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SUMMARY

Increased U.S. military activity in Central America is having a profound impact on nations of the region in terms of their own domestic situations as well as the extremely sensitive regional climate. This activity, moving parallel with the Contadora peace process and the Stone mission, is shaping events which will determine matters of peace or further turmoil in the area in the coming months.

The past few months of relative calm, during which important military and political changes have taken place, have prompted a degree of optimism among United States and Salvadoran officials in San Salvador. While this is seen by many as a turning point, the coming months, with an expected offensive by the quiescent guerrilla forces, should serve to indicate if the optimism is justified. (Activity did pick up in September.) Internal and regional political developments will be additional determining factors.

Politically, the government is slowly moving toward elections. Human rights violations continue with the military leadership admitting no responsibility for the killing and abuses. There has been virtually no progress in the cases of the murdered Americans and prime military suspects still remain free. Some progress has been indicated in the search for a political solution as the government and the FDR/FMLN begin to meet directly.

The situation between Nicaragua and Honduras is becoming increasingly tense with the United States-Honduran joint military maneuvers and U.S. naval operations off the coasts of Nicaragua. The Hondurans generally feel a sense of security with the increasing U.S. military presence in their country. In the short term at least, the very evident presence of U.S. military personnel in Tegucigalpa and other parts of the country is seen by the Hondurans as positive, especially in terms of an influx of much needed dollars into the lagging economy. Honduran reaction to the U.S. presence by the end of the 6-month period of the military operations, and especially if the U.S. military remains after that period, could be much different, however. Most important is the generally negative reaction among the Hondurans to the Regional Military Training Center established at Puerto Castilla, where 125 U.S. advisers are training troops from El Salvador, Honduras' traditional enemy.

The Nicaraguan leadership perceives a threat with the U.S. military presence in Honduras, not as much as from fear of a direct planned attack from U.S. forces but because U.S. troops, relatively close to the border for an extended period of time, could become drawn into actual combat if the ever-present border tensions lead to conflict. The U.S. military presence is serving to exacerbate the troubled state of relations between Nicaragua and Honduras.

Despite concerns by both sides on the potential for war between Nicaragua and Honduras, neither ranks an actual attack by one on the other as the principal threat. The tense situation, along with military preparations in both countries, however, does not permit the discounting of open warfare between the two neighbors. In Nicaragua, the "contras" (counterrevolutionaries), are believed to be supported by the CIA and the Honduran military, and are considered the major problem because intensive fighting is taking place now in various parts of the country. In Honduras, the head of the Armed Forces, General Gustavo Alvarez, has begun to focus public attention on a guerrilla threat which he charges is being aided by Nicaragua and Cuba.

The internal situation in Nicaragua continues to polarize and harden. The Sandinista government and the opposition, comprised of the church, the private sector, the anti-Sandinista press, and organized political parties are as far from reconciliation as ever. The resulting difficult economic and political situation, exacerbated by the increasing international pressures, have contributed to injudicious measures affecting freedom of the press, political freedom, and policies toward the Indian population. Popular support for the Sandinistas is seen as becoming stronger in the face of the threat from the contras and external pressures, principally exercised by the United States.

The regional climate also has affected the internal political situation in Honduras. The military, traditionally powerful within the Honduran political structure, is being strengthened politically by the increasingly close military relationship with the United States. General Alvarez in particular, is becoming ever more important in the political and economic life of the nation, especially in these days of the virtual incapacitation due to illness of elected President Roberto Suazo Cordoba. Political leaders point to disturbing instances of repressive acts by the military, which if not curbed now could result in a growing and more serious human rights problem. Most in Honduras' civilian political leadership, however, believe that the nation's shaky democratic system will prevail and that General Alvarez' political ambitions will be channeled through the constitutional process.

With the situation in Central America moving steadily and dangerously toward an enlarged regional war, the Contadora process appears to be the best hope for peace in the region. Nicaragua's change in policy toward accepting a regional approach to its problems with Honduras provides an impetus needed to keep the process on track. Strong United States support for Contadora, however, is essential.

EL SALVADOR

Summary

The dominant themes in El Salvador continue to be the civil war, the performance of the military, especially in the area of human rights, the political situation, and the process toward a political settlement of the conflict. Based on conversations with United States and Salvadoran officials, including President Magana, this section will focus on some of the more recent developments in these areas including the new attitude and strategy adopted by the military, the nature of the political system as the nation haltingly moves toward elections, and the current status of the discussions between the government and the FDR/FMLN on a political settlement.

Military Situation

The change in Defense Minister from Colonel Guillermo Garcia to Colonel Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, plus strong urgings by U.S. military personnel, seem to have resulted in a revitalized fighting force. The troops are more involved in longer operations, staying out of their barracks for days at a time in a change from the previous 9 to 5 system which had been the subject of much criticism. The military leadership also is quick to point out to visiting U.S. delegations that the new military attitude includes instruction in human rights and human relations. The military is optimistic about the new strategy and tactics and already sees a payoff in the military situation of recent months. The Salvadoran military's degree of success in this period has to be tempered by the fact that the guerrillas have been relatively inactive. Some observers attribute this to the opposition's concentration on reestablishing internal unity. Others attribute the fall-off in guerrilla activity to a deliberate evaluation of the new developments within the military, including the new reconstruction program which is underway.

The positive expressions of improvement in military capability were being made at the same time that Minister of Defense Vides Casanova was announcing, in a report to the Constituent Assembly, that in the 12 months ending June 30, 1983, 2,292 Salvadoran troops were killed in action, 4,195 were wounded, and 328 were missing. This casualty count represents one-fifth of El Salvador's military and is double the casualty rate of the previous 12-month period.

A day and a half in the provincial capital of San Vicente and the surrounding area provided an opportunity to talk to United States and Salvadoran military and civilian officials involved in the reconstruction project as well as villagers living under the new system.

The Salvadoran Government, with the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), has embarked on an ambitious reconstruction program in the provinces of San Vicente and Usulutan, where large concentrations of guerrillas have been active. Colonel Rinaldo Golcher, Commander of the Fifth Brigade in San Vicente, explained that the National Plan of Reconstruction (CORDERA) was initiated on June 10 to bring peace to the region. It was designed to protect the population with increased military activity while the government agencies, with AID support, restore services such as electricity, water, and education to the towns and villages. Involved are the ministries of Health and Welfare, Education, Interior, Agriculture, Public Works, and Defense. The program obviously is designed to win "the hearts and minds" of the people from support of the guerrillas. Colonel Golcher emphasized the humanitarian aspects of the project as he discussed the human rights training of the soldiers, the rebuilding of the roads, and the reopening of the schools. Golcher believed that the objective of bringing peace to the region had practically been accomplished in the 2 months since its inception. The military objectives of projecting a higher profile and a more active role in the two provinces is well underway. Military convoys and personnel were seen busily moving about as one traveled the roads of San Vicente.

The U.S. military advisers in San Vicente were very positive about the new Salvadoran army of recent months. They felt that the young soldiers were responsive to the U.S. training and that the officers were adopting a better fighting strategy. Some advisers believed that the number of U.S. advisers in El Salvador was adequate to accomplish their objectives. The advisers in San Vicente are duly concerned with their security but freely walk in a two-block square area from the barracks. They do not venture far beyond the Gran Pavo (Big Turkey) restaurant, a favorite gathering place.

U.S. officials involved in the reconstruction project are sensitive to the parallels that have been made in the United States between the Salvadoran program and the pacification program (CORDS), in Vietnam. The principal distinction, based on discussions with United States and Salvadoran officials, seems to be that in contrast to the CORDS "pacification" program, the Salvadoran "reconstruction" project was initiated, conceived and administered by the Salvadorans. The Vietnam program, they explain, was totally a U.S. operation. Ambassador Hinton, according to U.S. sources, was instrumental in joining AID to the Salvadoran reconstruction program. In another point of contrast, the personnel involved are not living in the towns but are making periodic visits from their offices in San Salvador.

Visits to the model project towns of San Esteban Catarina and San Lorenzo illustrated the program's potential as well as its problems. The involvement of the various government agencies in a coordinated fashion in restoring electricity, water supply, reopening schools, and providing other services, is a definite benefit to the people who have never been the object of such concern by the government. To provide security, a unit of the army or one of the security forces is quartered in each town where the project is underway. Eventually a volunteer civil defense force, made up of local citizens will take over the security function. People are moving back into their former towns and villages and

generally feel comfortable with the new situation. Both San Esteban Catarina and San Lorenzo had experienced guerrilla attacks and the townspeople expressed relief that the area had been quiet in the past months. The mayor of San Lorenzo recounted a 2-day occupation of the town by guerrillas during which they held meetings to tell the people of their successes and purchased food from the local stores.

Although the Salvadoran Government and United States officials are calling the program an important and significant success, there are obvious problems and pitfalls. A serious effort at reconstruction and bringing the benefits to the people of both provinces will take an enormous amount of the government's scarce resources. Maintaining the gains that have been made through reconstruction will also prove to be difficult, especially if the guerrillas choose to conduct an offensive in these provinces. On the political side, there could be problems with the presence of the army and security forces in the towns as well as with the civil defense forces which will be taking over the defense responsibilities. The Treasury Police, for example, is providing security in the town of San Esteban Catarina, not a very comforting fact to those villagers who are aware of the Treasury Police reputation for human rights abuses. Another problem could be the composition and quality of the civil guard. There is much speculation that members of the outlawed, extremist paramilitary force, Orden, will become active in the civil guard and transform it into a force of authoritarianism and repression. Even if the civil guard becomes the apolitical defense force, as intended, there is the real question of its ability to fight against the well-trained and experienced guerrilla forces when the expected offensive begins.

Internal Political Situation

The political picture of recent months is a mixed one as the government attempts to open the system to reform, cites improvements in the human rights area, and supports a notion of dialogue with the FDR/FMLN opposition. At the same time, however, human rights abuses continue, arbitrary and harsh measures are taken under the state of siege authority, and military personnel guilty of abuses, for the most part remain unpunished. The human rights situation remains one of the most difficult and serious problems, especially because the security forces continue to be the principal violators. At a meeting with the chiefs of the military and other security forces, Armed Forces Chief of Staff Colonel Reyes Mena boldly stated that he had no knowledge of paramilitary death squads and attributed the publicity surrounding them to "Marxist-Leninist propaganda." He also denied any knowledge of torture as well as any increase in human rights abuses. He was supported on these contentions by heads of the National Police and the Treasury Police. In contrast, during a visit to the Mariona prison, the approximately 300 political prisoners indicated that they had been tortured by military and security force personnel before being taken to the prison. Many of them have been in the prison for long periods of time without trial. When asked about military personnel going unpunished for human rights abuses, Colonel Reyes said that the officer in charge of the troops involved in the

Las Hojas massacre in February, where a large number of Indians were killed in Sonsonate Province, was under arrest through an administrative procedure. Reports had been circulating that the officer in charge was not being held in custody. On this question of the military disciplining their own, the officers expressed the opinion that military personnel should be considered before civilian courts when committing civil crimes. This, of course, presents a problem because the civilian judges, especially in Salvador's very ineffective judicial system, are subject to threats and intimidation as well as other pressures.

President Magana, during a meeting with the delegation, spoke more positively about the political situation. He confirmed that the officer in charge of the Las Hojas massacre is under arrest and additionally he said that the records of the International Committee of the Red Cross would show that "only" one-third of the men at Mariona had been tortured.

President Magana responded to concerns expressed about the long delay in bringing to justice the national guardsmen being held for the murders of the American churchwomen in December 1980. He said the government was about ready to announce a trial date when new evidence was introduced by lawyers for the relatives of the churchwomen, necessitating further investigation. While most Salvadorans involved in the case focus on the activity of the families' lawyers as reason for the latest delay, the Department of State had also informed the Salvadoran Government that there were additional steps to be taken before the case could properly be raised to the final trial stage.

The government's amnesty program is cited by Salvadoran Government officials as one of the more positive recent developments. Under the program in effect since May 16, and extended until August 15, 549 of the 730 political prisoners incarcerated at the inception of the program have participated as have 485 people associated with the guerrilla movement. Discussion with a number of participants in the amnesty program at its makeshift housing facility at the international fairgrounds focused on their anxieties and frustrations over the way the system has worked. Many of the men expressed fear for their lives when the amnesty program would come to its scheduled end in that next week. They told stories of people being harassed by both the government's military and security forces as well as by the guerrillas when they left the safety of the amnesty center. They believe that they still are regarded by the government forces as enemies and by the guerrillas as traitors. The majority of those in the program seem to have been under the impression that amnesty would lead to a new life in peace outside of El Salvador. Canada and Australia have accepted a number of political prisoners but not former guerrilla fighters. At least 200 political prisoners and their families remain. At the time of the delegation's visit, the United States had not accepted any of the amnesty participants. (It was announced, however, on September 21, that the United States would admit 200 Salvadorans as political refugees—50 of them former political prisoners and the rest family members.)

Although Salvadoran Government and U.S. officials spoke of positive developments on the political side, others pointed to problems

which still exist or may have become worse. The question of the date of the presidential election is still unresolved. According to some political observers, the old ruling party which formed an alliance between the military and conservative business and political interests, the Party of National Conciliation (PNC), is gaining strength and is sure to be a strong factor in the next election. Some speculate that the next government will be more conservative than the present one and that advances like land reform could be threatened. Also offered was the view that Roberto D'Aubuisson is losing power within the ARENA party and that key military figures believe that he has been discredited.

Negotiations With the Guerrilla Opposition

The form of participation by the FDR/FMLN is the principal point around which the subject of a political settlement with the left is discussed. President Magana said that his government supported the concept of negotiations with the opposition left but only on the point of participation in the coming election. He was not optimistic about success of negotiations because he believed the guerrillas were divided and the government did not know with whom it should be talking. Leaders of the FDR/FMLN, during a meeting with the delegation in San Jose, Costa Rica stated that they want negotiations with the government with no preconditions. They find it impossible to agree to participate in elections while the present conflict continues but believe that elections should be one of the issues discussed. Ruben Zamora, a member of the Political-Diplomatic Commission of the FDR/FMLN, argued that elections should be only one part of the negotiation process. He and the other representatives of the Salvadoran guerrilla movement believed that in order to have free elections a dialogue has to be held to find solutions to other fundamental problems such as the military and security forces and the death squads. The FDR/FMLN wants a dialogue to lead to participation in a provisional government which would then pave the way for free and democratic elections. On the surface there seems to be very little room for substantive dialogue, but meetings between the FDR/FMLN and the Salvadoran Government's Peace Commission as well as the Stone mission offer some hope of settlement if even ever so slight.

Current political developments aside, the basic fact of life in El Salvador is that the military remains all powerful and continues to abuse its authority by acting above the law. Meaningful change will take place in El Salvador only when civilians, democratically elected, gain the authority to mandate that the military itself undertakes basic changes within the institution.

NICARAGUA

Summary

Heightened tensions with neighboring Honduras, the growing presence of the U.S. military in that country, the U.S. naval activity off both coasts, and the escalation of counterrevolutionary (contra) activity have increased the pressure on the Government of Nicaragua. The sharpened perception of threat has further complicated the task of the Nicaraguan Government, already challenged to deal with a difficult political and economic situation. While the government commands the support of a significant segment of the population, its policies and methods continue to alienate others, especially the church, the private sector, and the opposition political parties.

Internal Political Situation

Although the government is attempting to make concessions designed to create a political opening, the problems are very evident. Officials spoke of the preparations for elections to be held in 1985, and spoke of the law governing political parties which was about to be approved by the Council of State. The opposition parties, however, do not believe the Sandinistas really want a participatory democracy but that they will continue to take measures to restrict assembly and other party activity, which will continue to guarantee the supremacy of the ruling Sandinista party.

The status of press freedom remains poor as censorship continues to be exercised, exemplified by the closing of *La Prensa* for brief periods because of violations. The latest closing resulted from the publication of an article about the stoning of the home of former junta member Violeta Chamorro, the wife of the late anti-Somoza publisher and the mother of the current publisher. The closing occurred only a few days prior to the delegation's visit and provoked reactions from many, especially from the delegation members associated with the media. Although Sandinista officials defended their policy toward *La Prensa* on grounds of the state of war which they strongly perceive, all of the officials, including junta leader Daniel Ortega and Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto called the recent closing an error.

Relations between the government and the private sector are having a serious negative impact on the economy. The private sector is not reinvesting in the economy, maintaining only minimal participation. Agriculture is especially affected because the private sector is reluctant to increase acreage for production. The depressed agricultural situation is exacerbated by the loss of tobacco and coffee production due to activities of the contras. This and other factors have resulted in shortages of foods available to the people, especially cooking oil.

The government's relationship with the church under Archbishop Ovando y Bravo, like that with the private sector, is as strained as ever. The Archbishop was especially critical of the Sandinista's treatment of the Pope during his visit in March. He accused the Sandinistas of promoting teachings in the schools against the Pope and also charged that Sandinista officials moved through the throngs in Masaya to encourage the chanting of pro-Sandinista slogans during the Pope's recitation of the mass. Persons not associated with the government later told members of the delegation that the chanting from the crowd was an urging for the Pope to say a prayer for Sandinista soldiers recently killed in action against the contras. The Archbishop also charged that the Sandinistas were repressing the church because they do not permit the televising of his sermons. The Sandinistas responded by saying that they are willing to allow all of the bishops to televise their sermons on an equal and rotating basis, but that the Archbishop has turned this down because he wants to be the only one on television. The Nicaraguan Government's differences with the church, the private sector, and the opposition parties seem to be irreconcilable. Internal peace and progress in Nicaragua will not occur until accommodation can be found. This is not likely to occur until regional tensions, to which both opposition and government constantly respond, subsides.

Relations between the government and the Miskito Indians are difficult because of the virtual total lack of trust on either side. Out of fear, thousands of Miskitos have fled into Honduras and many have joined the contra guerrillas. Forty-two of the one hundred fifty-six Indian religious congregations have relocated in Honduras. For this reason, many Sandinistas see the Indian population as actual or potential counterrevolutionaries. Over 300 Miskitos are in prison, 11 of them ministers of the Moravian Church. Many of the problems stem from early attempts by the Sandinistas to incorporate the Indians into the new revolutionary system, but contra activity spurred on by dissident Indian leaders in the Atlantic coast region, caused the Sandinistas to institute a relocation program away from the Rio Coco border area, disrupting the lives of thousands. The evacuation of the lands through forced removal in many instances, resulted in the resettlement of 8,000–9,000 Indians. Reconciliation attempts are being made on both sides. Indian leaders such as Norman Bent and Fernando Colmar who are also ministers of the Moravian Church expressed support for the Sandinistas. They said that they want to be part of the revolution but that they want more participation of the Atlantic coast population. On the government side, Minister of Interior Borge maintains a monthly dialogue with Indian leaders.

Perception of Threat: The Contras, Honduras, and the United States

Nicaragua's perception of threat, present since the beginning of the deterioration of relations with the United States, has been exacerbated by the tense regional situation. The Sandinistas believe that the military problems with Honduras, and the new situation posed by the presence of U.S. troops there are bringing the countries to the edge of war. The principal threat to Nicaraguan security, however, as seen by the Sandinistas, is from the counterrevolutionaries—the contras. Daniel Ortega articulated this in a meeting with Senator Tsongas and

Representative Shannon. Ortega emphasized that Nicaragua's primary concern was with the contras, second, with the Honduran Army, and third, with the possibility of U.S. military involvement in Nicaragua, because of their presence in Honduras.

The main concern of the Sandinista leadership is the activity of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) whose estimated 4,000–7,000 men are operating in different sectors of Nicaraguan territory. Since beginning operations in the northern border areas from bases in neighboring Honduras, the FDN has boldly conducted operations in the central part of the country. The FDN has inflicted serious economic damage in destroying bridges, equipment, and crops, and the Sandinista militia and army have taken a significant number of casualties, including at least 700 killed. Increased FDN activity has succeeded in tying down significant numbers of Nicaraguan troops, but at the same time, is serving to solidify the Sandinista position as substantial numbers within the population maintain their support for the government. This was a recurrent theme expressed during discussion with various people.

Disaffected Miskito Indians provide another contra force and operate principally in the northern Atlantic coast region, where the Indian population is centered. Some Indian factions are associated with the FDN and others with the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE) led by former Sandinista hero Eden Pastora.

The Pastora forces, numbering about 1,500–3,000, operate principally in the southern jungle region near the Costa Rican border. The Sandinistas do not seem to be as militarily concerned with ARDE because the territory is not considered strategically important and is not heavily populated. Politically, however, Pastora offers a threat because of his popularity as a principal leader of the Sandinista revolution against the Somoza dictatorship and because of the moderate image of the ARDE organization in contrast to the Somocista and hardline conservative image of the FDN.

The Nicaraguans are also very preoccupied about possible hostilities with Honduras. When contra activity was first initiated, the Nicaraguans charged that the Honduran military was aiding the counterrevolutionaries on the Honduran side of the border. The Nicaraguan concern over Honduras now is directed toward fear of armed confrontation with the Honduran army itself. Troops are positioned on both sides of the border with the general belief by observers that the Nicaraguans outnumber the Hondurans by a wide margin. Fire was exchanged for a week in May, but since the mutual withdrawal from the border area after that incident, there has been only minor military activity.

Despite the threat from the contras, and the talk of potential war with Honduras, very little military activity is seen in the Managua area. By way of illustration, during a trip along the main highway north to Esteli, an area where contras are operating, only several empty troop trucks were seen.

Beyond the public statements of fear of direct attack from the United States, the Nicaraguans more realistically fear the possibility that the United States will be drawn into hostilities if the situation with Honduras worsens. Daniel Ortega specifically expressed his anxieties over the presence of thousands of U.S. troops in Honduras, some relatively close to the Nicaraguan border, over the long 6-month

period of the maneuvers. He believes that the United States is committed to supporting Honduras in the event of hostilities, emphasizing that the Honduran military has publicly spoken about the need for U.S. troops in the eventuality of hostilities with Nicaragua. The U.S. troops in Honduras are also seen by Nicaragua as giving additional psychological and moral support to the contras, already buoyed by support from various sources in the United States.

The United States and Contadora

Nicaragua wants a better relationship with the United States, especially economic. The country is in great need of agricultural equipment and other goods from the United States, especially spare parts. Politically, a better relationship with the United States would reduce the international and internal pressures faced by the Sandinistas and allow them to deal with their economic and political problems in a less charged atmosphere. The Contadora process, initiated by the Governments of Mexico, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela, to reach a political settlement in Central America, might prove to be the catalyst in an improvement in relations between Nicaragua and the United States.

After many months of taking a seemingly intransigent position on discussing peace only on bilateral terms with Honduras, the Nicaraguans, in mid–July, agreed to the Contadora recommendation that the issue be considered within a regional multilateral context, allowing all the Contadora countries and the other Central American countries a role. This position is viewed as an important concession on the part of the Sandinista leadership but also as a sign of its willingness to reduce tensions in the area. The change in Sandinista policy is attributed by some observers to a Nicaraguan response to the tough message sent by the Reagan Administration in the sending of the fleet off Nicaraguan shores and the troops to Honduras. Other factors, however, weighed heavily on the Nicaraguan decision, especially the counsel of the Socialist International, friendly European countries, as well as the advice reportedly received from Cuba.

Costa Rican Views

In meetings in San Jose, Costa Rican officials expressed a traditional anxiety over political developments in Nicaragua as well as consternation over Nicaraguan involvement in labor and other incidents in Costa Rica last year which have caused a definite chill in relations. They expressed the hope that international pressures would influence a positive change in the direction of the Nicaraguan Government. Support was expressed for recent U.S. policy toward Nicaragua which the Costa Ricans hoped would lead to improvements and democratic elections. President Monge believed that the Nicaraguan people, in general, do not support the contras and that they will maintain support for the Sandinista government if human rights are respected and pluralism and a mixed economy can be achieved. He expressed the fear that war between Nicaragua and Honduras would expand into a regional war and that Contadora, therefore, has to be supported. President Monge also believed, from discussions with Costa Rican figures who recently traveled to Havana, that Fidel Castro wants a dialogue with the United States and that the United States should take advantage of this offer and talk with the Cubans.

HONDURAS

Summary

The presence of U.S. military personnel in Honduras is having an impact on the political and economic life of the nation as well as on the tense situation between Honduras and Nicaragua. Discussions with the spectrum of political leadership in Honduras revealed reaction to the U.S. military presence ranging from indifference to serious concern that Honduras would be drawn more deeply into the conflict in Central America. Among the politicians there was more intense concern over the training of Salvadoran troops on Honduran territory by the United States than over the U.S. presence in connection with the joint maneuvers with the Honduran military. Politically, the U.S. presence is seen as strengthening the military leadership at a time when the civilian sector of government is weakened by the virtual incapacitation of President Suazo Cordoba because of serious illness. Economically, most Hondurans in the short term at least, see a benefit from the U.S. presence in the form of much needed dollars into the economy. In addition, some Hondurans see the presence of U.S. forces as a security backup in the developing conflict with Nicaragua.

U.S. Military Presence

The U.S. military presence is quickly becoming an established fact of life in Honduras. In Tegucigalpa, U.S. military personnel in fatigues and civilian clothes enliven the lobby of the Hotel Maya which is enjoying a boom of sorts with its military guests, the large contingent of international media covering the event, and other visitors from the United States, including members of visiting congressional delegations. Groups of uniformed United States and Honduran military personnel gathering in the hotel lobby or waiting outside for transportation, convoys of U.S. military trucks loaded with equipment moving through the city, and Hondurans ready to serve and accommodate the Americans are commonplace scenes today in the capital.

In his 10-minute briefing to the first group of reporters bussed to the Comayagua air base, Colonel Arnold Schlossberg, commander of the U.S. forces in the joint maneuvers called Big Pine II emphasized the humanitarian, rather than the military, aspects of the exercises. The colonel said that the operations will provide an opportunity for people-to-people contact as water wells will be dug, the hospital facility which will be constructed will also serve the population of the area and will remain when the exercises are completed, and toys will be left for the children of Honduras. Colonel Schlossberg said that

the exercises would provide the opportunity to practice deployment of troops from the United States to another country and that United States forces would be performing all types of missions, mostly combat support. In underlining Administration policy, Schlossberg carefully and deliberately stated that in Honduras there will be the "training" of U.S. forces, and the "exercising" of Honduran forces. At the time of the briefing, with the exercises just about to get underway, there were 800 U.S. military personnel, a number which will rise to about 5,000 when a 900-man Marine combat contingent will arrive for exercises sometime in November.

Comayagua is a picture of bustling military activity with its hundreds of army tents and air conditioned office huts, power and telephone lines being installed, and other facilities being constructed so that the air base will serve as the coordinating point for the joint maneuvers. Other military bases and airfields are being utilized for the massive operation. At the La Ceiba air base in the north, for instance, a small contingent of U.S. military personnel was involved in the unloading of a steady flow of C–130 transports bringing in various pieces of equipment for the exercises.

A too brief visit was made to the Regional Military Training Center at Puerto Castilla on the north coast established by the U.S. military to train Salvadoran troops with more than the 55 trainers limited for that mission in El Salvador itself. Colonel John Mirus, in charge of the operation, with its contingent of 125 U.S. advisers, highlighted the objectives of the mission. At present the Puerto Castilla training facility consists of three temporary buildings for administration, a hospital, and a mess hall, and acres of tents housing the troops of the 1,000-man Arce quick reaction battalion. Colonel Mirus praised the Acre Battalion as being better prepared than the first Salvadoran contingents which were trained at Fort Bragg and Fort Benning. He said that this facility was better adapted to the situation faced by the Salvadoran military because of the terrain and setting similar to that in El Salvador. The Salvadorans are put through cycles of 6 continuous days in the field with 1 day back at the training center for a morning of remedial work and an afternoon of R&R in the nearby town. Four Salvadoran "cazador" units are scheduled to receive training at Puerto Castilla in the next months.

For political reasons, the first troops to be trained at the center were Honduran. Honduran troops remain at the facility as if to underline and emphasize their sovereignty. Aware of the traditional animosity toward each other which was manifested in a brief war between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969 known as the "Soccer War," the troops are segregated and measures are taken to assure a peaceful, if not easy, coexistence.

Colonel Mirus did not have information which would throw light on speculation that the Regional Military Training Center is to become a permanent facility which might replace or supplement the training performed at the School of the Americas in Panama. The U.S. military seems to be very content with Puerto Castilla, which aside from offering suitable terrain also offers a beautiful natural deep water harbor. (In early October, a rumored Pentagon proposal to build a $150 million naval dock was confirmed.)

Interestingly, there does not seem to be much negative reaction to the U.S. presence among the general population, at least in Tegucigalpa. Not many signs of open opposition are seen. In many trips through the downtown area of Tegucigalpa, only one wall slogan demanding the ouster of the U.S. military was seen. In the short term, the presence is viewed as good for the economy. A U.S. presence beyond the stated 6-month duration of the joint maneuvers, however, could result in a change of this attitude. An extended stay by U.S. troops is a widely-speculated assumption in Tegucigalpa.

Discussions with the spectrum of political leadership in Honduras revealed mixed reaction to the U.S. military presence for participation in the joint maneuvers. The more conservative politicians, as expected, were quite satisfied with the U.S. presence because it offers a sense of security if the situation with Nicaragua grows closer to open warfare. Some politicians close to the civilians in power voiced indifference. The major criticism came from those political leaders considered moderate left, who believed that the maneuvers were not consistent with the Contadora process. They expressed the opinion that it is impossible to work out a political solution to the conflict in Central America with U.S. soldiers stationed in Honduras. One believed that the United States should back off and let the Central American nations work out their problems. Another politician offered the view that if a national debate were to take place the U.S. presence would be rejected.

The great majority of the political leaders, however, revealed intense concern over the training of Salvadoran troops at Puerto Castilla where U.S. advisers are training troops from El Salvador, the traditional enemy and rival of Honduras. The announcement of the Regional Training Center by General Alvarez in July, precipitated a constitutional crisis which has caused anxiety among those civilians concerned about the growing power of the military. There was no public discussion before the training center was announced. The Congress was not consulted about the agreement with the United States to establish the center. The crisis was finally resolved when the approval was secured from the Congress but only after acrimonious outcries. Many political leaders refer to the training center and other activities at Puerto Castilla as "The Base," and anticipate that it will become a permanent facility. They argue that the operation at Puerto Castilla is not necessary for the defense of Honduras. These people expressed the fear that the training of Salvadoran troops is going to bring Honduras into the war in El Salvador. A pervading fear among the politicians was the real question as to who these Salvadoran troops trained on Honduran territory will fight next after hostilities are ended in El Salvador.

Internal Political Situation

The U.S. military presence, a high-profile symbol of the closer United States-Honduran military relationship, is becoming a factor in the internal political situation in Honduras. It has heightened an undercurrent of tension which already exists between the military and civilians, and which is especially sensitive in these days of President

Suazo's incapacitation and virtual disappearance from leadership. There is particular concern among many political leaders that General Gustavo Alvarez, head of the traditionally powerful armed forces, is increasing his power, and that the growing military relationship with the United States is providing him with the sanction and the wherewithal to strengthen his role in government. Along with President Suazo Cordoba and other high ranking military and civilian officials, General Alvarez is a member of the National Security Council which makes decisions affecting the political and economic life of the country. The General has very good relations with leaders of the major political parties, is involved in a number of business ventures, and is a member of the important group of conservative businessmen, the Association for the Promotion of Honduras (APROH). Many Hondurans believe that General Alvarez would like to become President and is making arrangements now to become a candidate in the election which is scheduled to be held in 2 years. Recent internal political activity and maneuverings have increased speculation that General Alvarez will be a presidential candidate whenever elections take place. Some Hondurans speculate that an Alvarez-led coup is a possibility, but given the General's popularity and position, the chances for the constitutional process to prevail are good. The open criticism of General Alvarez, which appears in some of the nation's press, is an illustration of the nature of the new Honduran system. A disturbing sign, acknowledged by some of the political leaders, is the increase in human rights violations attributed to the military, especially disappearances of activists. The increase in political violence is attributed by some to the growing power of the military.

Perception of Threat: Nicaragua

The Honduran perception of threat from Nicaragua is as strong as that seen by the Nicaraguans from their northern neighbor. Like the Nicaraguans, the Hondurans perceive both a military threat from Nicaragua and an insurgency threat from within supported by external sources. The Honduran military fears a Nicaraguan military buildup and cites Nicaraguan military positions which could be used for an attack on Honduras. Although acknowledging that the Nicaraguan positions are in defensive deployment, concern was expressed over the location of Nicaraguan tank battalions which could be used in an attack through the Chuluteca gap area of Honduras, north of the Gulf of Fonseca. There is talk of the possibility of a Nicaraguan push into Chuluteca to link with Salvadoran guerrillas holding territory bordering that area of Honduras, thus creating a territory controlled by Honduras' enemies and providing a secure overland route from Nicaragua to El Salvador. Concern was also expressed about the possibility that Nicaraguan troops could enter Honduran territory in hot pursuit of the contras. (In early October, Nicaraguan Defense Minister Humberto Ortega, in fact, announced that Nicaragua would pursue contras into Honduran and Costa Rican territory.)

While there is a general feeling that war between Honduras and Nicaragua is very possible, people do not believe that it is inevitable. Although the Honduran military is geared for the possibility of armed

hostilities with Nicaragua, there is little visible evidence of more than usual military activity other than that associated with the joint maneuvers. Tegucigalpa is not an armed camp and a visit to the Las Manos border crossing revealed that it was watched only by a small contingent of border guards, not regular army. No signs of military activity were seen on the Nicaraguan side of the border, although it was indicated that both the Nicaraguans and the Hondurans had gun emplacements on the hills overlooking the border crossing. The commanding officer at Las Manos said that the Nicaraguans fired on the customs house a few days before, but the Hondurans did not return the fire. Other than a few military trucks seen in the area of the headquarters of the Sixth Battalion, which has responsibility for that sector of the southern region of the country, no unusual military activity was seen. The Commander of the Sixth Brigade spoke of the week-long exchange of fire with Nicaragua in May and indicated that if the Nicaraguans were testing the performance of the Honduran military, he doubted that Nicaragua would be attacking Honduras in the near future. The colonel spoke of the poor quality of Nicaragua's Russian-made artillery shells which were displayed outside the headquarters building.

In this period of mid-August, General Alvarez spoke more of the threat from insurgency rather than directly from Nicaragua, and military officials expressed anxieties over what they believe is Nicaragua's creed of "revolution without borders." In a major press conference attended by many of the journalists of the international press corps in Honduras covering the initiation of the joint maneuvers, General Alvarez charged that Nicaragua along with Cuba, was training and harboring Honduran insurgents. Put on display were two Hondurans who reportedly had defected after Cuban training. According to the Honduran Government, insurgent activity has increased in recent months. General Alvarez said that Honduras would need much more money in military and economic assistance from the United States to help the government combat the insurgent threat.

General Alvarez' views on the seriousness of guerrilla threat are not shared by many of the political leaders who are eager to point out that unlike other Central American countries, Honduras had had a good land distribution program, a strong labor force, and governments which have been responsive to the social and economic needs of the people. These people acknowledged, however, that the economic needs of the country are greater and that pressures are increasing as the government attempts to deal with rising unemployment, hunger and poverty. The civilians believed that the priority should be given to the economic needs of the country over what the military sees as its requirements. Honduras needs investment and loans from the outside as well as technical assistance, especially in agriculture. The economic health of Honduras has been affected by the increasing tensions and talk of war with Nicaragua and the guerrilla threat. Foreign investment is not entering the country because international investors are not eager to put money into a situation which seems to be so fluid.

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